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VIII.—THE *NIBELUNGENLIED* AND *SAGE* IN MODERN POETRY.

In an article, entitled *Nibelungensage und Nibelungendichtungen*, which appeared in the *Preussische Jahrbücher* a little over a year ago (October, 1894), Dr. A. Schmidt, after a summary of the entire *Nibelungensage* and a comparison of this *Sage* with the form it assumes in the *Nibelungenlied*, makes the following statement: "Though it would be madness after Homer to reconstruct anew the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in poetic form, after the mediæval author it is really a religious duty of German poets who have the interests of their nation at heart to recast into higher forms the imperfectly coined *Nibelungen* treasure." In these words the essayist expresses not merely a personal opinion, but echoes the sentiments of many other German critics,¹ and above all of over forty authors who, with over fifty different productions in drama and epic poetry, have tried to recast into 'higher forms' the *Nibelungensage* as a whole or in part. This large number of attempts includes three or four dramatic sketches, but does not include the 'lower forms' of lyric and ballad poetry, or of prose narrative. After the clear and thorough discussion of *Nibelungen* dramas by Professor Carl Weitbrecht,² it might seem unnecessary to discuss this part of the general subject any further, but there are certain aspects of this question which he has not touched upon which it is the purpose of this paper to consider; and, while there is complete agreement with the views advanced by Prof. Weitbrecht, yet the attempt will be made to show that his conclusions do not warrant the same approval.

¹ Weitbrecht, Röpe, Piper and others; cf. Piper: *Die Nibelungen*, I. Theil (Kürschner's *Deutsche Nationallitteratur*. Bd. 6, Abth., II, p. 184).

² *Die Nibelungen im Modernen Drama*. Eine Antrittsvorlesung (gehalten den 5 Nov., 1892, am Eidgen. Polytechnikum in Zürich). Zürich, 1892.

The question as to whether the treasure of the *Nibelungen-sage* has been, or can be, 'recast into higher forms,' either of drama or of epic poetry, is an eminently practical one, aesthetic or dramaturgic theorizings can prove or establish nothing. The poetic value of the existing Nibelungen dramas cannot be determined in long philosophical discussions as to the propriety of using myths as a source of dramatical subjects, of the nature of 'dramatic guilt' (Aristotle's ἀμαρτία), of the theoretical differences between the drama and the epic, but in the case of each drama before us for criticism, we must simply ask, Has the poet in his play really mastered the difficulties inherent in the subject matter; has he created a living tragedy, one which, by its poetic beauty and dramatic power, carries away reader and spectator alike, and exacts the tribute of admiration from even those critics who, in their studies, would measure the beauties of living poetry by the canons of dead philosophical speculation? And we have a right to demand more; for, if we are to call any modern dramatic reproduction a 'higher form' than the *Nibelungenlied*, it must rank as high at least in the domain of tragedy as the mediæval German poem does amongst the epics of the world's literature. Where the modern poet would rival the old epic in its own field and try to re-create the *Sage* or the *Nibelungenlied* in epic form, he himself challenges 'odious comparison,' and has no reason to complain, because he cannot pass off debased metal stamped with the stamp of the genuine gold, or beguile us into believing that he is no longer a wren, because, forsooth, he has fluttered a little higher than the eagle, upon whose back he has been carried into the high heavens.

These practical criteria simplify immensely the task before us. It seems an appalling labor to try to determine which of the forty poets has performed most successfully 'his religious duty to the German nation,' and which drama or epic of the fifty bodies forth the 'higher form' of the Nibelungen treasure. But even German theorists have been able to agree upon the elimination of most of the forty authors and the most enthu-

siastic of German critics, with all their exaggerated pride in their national literature and their aesthetic magnifying-glasses, can find only four poets worthy of serious consideration¹—Geibel,² Hebbel³ and Richard Wagner⁴ amongst the dramatists; and William Jordan⁵ who essayed the *Nibelunge* in two long epics. Nowhere does there appear even a reference to William Morris' *Sigurd the Volsung*⁶ in the essays of German writers, but why they should utterly ignore so important a production is not easy to understand. For, in poetic power and beauty, both of conception and execution, it ranks at least as high as any of the productions of the above named authors. Some of the 'moderns' would include also amongst the more important works based upon the *Nibelungensage* Ibsen's *Chieftains of Helgeland*,⁷ which reveals a great deal of dramatic force and presents a thoroughly interesting modern realistic conception of the old hero-myth. Yet, since it lacks poetic form and diction, and makes no pretense to 'higher form,' it can hardly be ranked as a poetical production in a strict sense.

Passing over for the present the epics of Jordan and Morris to apply the practical tests to the dramas of Geibel, Hebbel and Wagner, we still find that no very perplexing problems of critical acumen or literary discrimination present themselves to the impartial judge who possesses only a moderate amount of critical literary taste. The dramas of Geibel and Hebbel

¹ Röpe, v. Muth, Bulthaupt, Weitbrecht.

² Emanuel Geibel, *Brunnhilde: Eine Tragödie aus der Nibelungen Sage*. Stuttgart, 1857.

³ F. Hebbel, *Die Nibelungen*. Trauerspiel. 3 Teile: 1. *Der gehörnte Siegfried*; 2. *Siegfrieds Tod*; 3. *Kriemhilds Rache*. Hamburg, 1862.

⁴ R. Wagner, *Der Ring der Niblungen*: 1. *Das Rheingold*; 2. *Die Walküre*; 3. *Siegfried*; 4. *Die Götterdämmerung*. Presented as a whole at Bayreuth, 1876.

⁵ Wilhelm Jordan, *Die Nibelunge*. 2 Theile: 1^{tes} Lied, *Sigfridssage*. Frankfurt, 1869; 2^{tes} Lied, *Hildebrands Heimkehr*. Frankfurt, 1875.

⁶ Wm. Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*. London, 1876.

⁷ Henrik Ibsen, *Härmändene paa Helgeland*. Christiania, 1858. German: *Die Nordische Herrfahrt*. Reclam 2633.

may be a prominent feature and take up much space in the histories of German literature and in critical essays on the German drama, but they constitute no important part of the repertoires of the German stage and seem to occupy but a very small place in the favor of the German theatre-going public.¹ These plays are rarely presented, whilst the classic plays of Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Kleist, yes even of Grillparzer and Ludwig, are being played all the time and in every city of importance. This state of affairs proves only one of two things. Either the Germans are, and will remain, hopelessly unappreciative of the 'higher' form of the *Lied* as presented by these authors, or else (and who could fail to recognize the fact?) the poets have failed in their attempts. As for the reading public the facts are still more striking.² The *Nibelungenlied*, in the original and in a

¹ It was impossible for the writer to get approximately accurate information of the repertoires of the theatres in Berlin and Munich, but in the two years from 1887 to 1889, though following carefully the plays given in these two capitals, he could find no announcement of the performance of either. Hebbel's *Nibelungen* was restaged and presented last winter at Berlin, the first time for eight years at least, and probably for a longer period. During the last eight years the writer has chanced upon only one other notice of the performance of these plays—Geibel's in New York, Hebbel's once in Frankfurt, and once in Hannover. Undoubtedly they are presented oftener, but, if very often, one would expect to see more frequent notices of their production. In Vienna, Hebbel's home during the last years of his life, his trilogy is one of the stock plays of the *Burgtheater*; in fact Prölss, one of Hebbel's most enthusiastic admirers (in his *Geschichte des Neueren Dramas*, vi, 251), claims that this theatre is the only place where it can be properly performed—a rather dubious compliment in view of the excellent productions of the German classic dramas and Shakespeare in the comparatively small cities of Germany.

² Simrock's translation is one of some thirty German translations of the *Nibelungenlied* into modern German. It reached its tenth edition in 1856, Geibel's *Brunhild* appearing in 1857; Simrock in 1889 was in its forty-ninth edition, Geibel in 1890 in its fifth. Simrock's translation passed through thirty-five editions while Hebbel's *Nibelungen* was passing through three. The large number of editions of the original text and the repeated reprints of these (*e. g.* Lachmann's has been reprinted eleven times, Zarncke's six) prove still more the popularity of the *Nibelungenlied* amongst the German people. The Germans cannot, at any rate, be called indifferent to their great poetic treasures.

large number of translations, has passed through, and is still passing through edition after edition, while Geibel's *Brunhild*, the earlier of the two dramas, is now only in its fifth, Hebbel's *Nibelungen* in its third edition. It is true, beyond all doubt, that 'in literature excellence cannot be counted by the numbering of heads,' yet when one considers the strong patriotic enthusiasm of the Germans for their literature, their exaggerated admiration of their native poets, the constant interest kept alive by the various literary cliques and cults, such bare, prosaic facts do mean something, and have decided weight in estimating the literary and dramatic value of the dramas under consideration.

The general attitude of German critics is decidedly in favor of Hebbel's *Nibelungen*, as compared with the *Brunhild* of Geibel, though they allow the greater poetic beauties of the latter. But let any unbiased reader weigh the testimony of Prölss,¹ Bulthaupt,² Gottschall,³ or even of Hebbel himself in his introduction to the play, and judge whether they establish their claims and make clear that even Hebbel has really created a drama which will take a place and live on with the greatest dramas of German literature; whether his drama occupies anywhere near the proud position which the *Lied* claims for itself in the literary productions of Germany. Their condemnatory criticism of such defects as cannot be defended, their apology for the other weak points in the drama, the excessive warmth and unnecessary enthusiasm in their praise of its good features prove only too clearly how far below a successful and truly great drama they feel it to be. Or rather let the reader go to the plays themselves, read them and re-read them, if necessary, and decide for himself whether they approximate in the least to the simple grandeur, the

¹ Robert Prölss, *Geschichte des Neueren Dramas*, vi, 329.

² Heinrich Bulthaupt, *Dramaturgie des Schauspiels*. 3rd edition. 1891, iii, p. 159 f.

³ R. v. Gottschall, *Die Deutsche Nationallitteratur des 19^{ten} Jahrhunderts*. 1891, iii, 500.

power and the rugged beauty of the *Nibelungenlied*, with all its imperfections. He can reach only one decision;¹ notwithstanding the great ingenuity of dramatic structure, the occasionally beautiful and powerful passages, both dramas fall far below their source in poetic value and beauty. And as for Wagner (whose trilogy, to receive any consideration in this connection, must be judged as a drama pure and simple, entirely apart from the music) Weibrecht's final verdict² seems thoroughly sound and the only correct one: "Wagner deserves great credit for his dramatic conception of the subject, but he was not enough of a poet not to fall short of his conception in the actual poetical execution." And with Weibrecht we must reach the final conclusion that the *Nibelungensage* is still waiting for the coming of the poet who will give it its definitive form.³ Röpe⁴ has called the Sage a Brunhild waiting for a delivering Siegfried; a beautiful metaphor and truer than appears on the surface, for all the weakling wooers in their attempts to subdue and win her met only with defeat and disgrace.

Why have the German poets failed? It is not the main purpose in this paper to discuss the peculiar inherent difficulties in the *Lied* and *Sage* which offer such obstacles to their successful dramatization, but simply to call attention to and emphasize those already pointed out in former discussions of this general subject, and then to proceed to the treatment of one aspect of this question which has not been touched upon before by any writer, and yet would seem to be of the highest importance. Fr. Theodor Vischer, in a short essay, *Vorschlag zu einer Oper*,⁵ was the first to discern and state clearly the first great practical difficulty in using the characters and motives of the *Sage* and *Lied* for a drama. "Endow these men of iron, these Titan-women with the eloquence

¹ Cf. Weibrecht.

² Weibrecht, p. 36.

³ Weibrecht, p. 37.

⁴ Röpe, *Die Modernen Nibelungendichtungen*. Hamburg, 1869.

⁵ *Kritische Gänge*, II, 369. Tübingen, 1844. Cf. also Freytag: *Die Technik des Dramas* (seventh edition, 1894), pp. 40; 243 and 244.

which the drama demands, with the sophistry of passion, with self-introspection, with the capacity to analyze their emotions, to justify, to doubt them, which qualities are absolutely essential to tragic characters, and they have lost their identity; their grandeur is to such an extent inseparable from their taciturnity, their self-centred depth of character which finds no expression in words, their ruggedness, that they will cease to be what they are, and yet cannot be changed to something else which might please or deeply affect us." Every Nibelungen drama, written before or since, has confirmed abundantly the truth of every word of this statement. Raupach's ¹ *Nibelungen Hort* shows fluency and facility, but absolutely no depth. In Geibel we are being offended continually by the weak sentimental and lyrical effusions of Siegfried and Chriemhild, by their thoroughly modern moral and philosophical speeches and reflexions, beautiful in themselves, but all out of keeping with the background and the characters of the drama. Hebbel has more nearly approached the ruggedness of the original, but there are only too frequent discordant notes of modern sentiment and thought, and the whole is marred by the mysticism and symbolism, unclear and confusing, even to the author himself, which pervade the entire drama and detract so much from the naturalness and effective simplicity of the characters and the plot.² And Wagner's ethical and philosophical views incorporated in his characters, in influencing their actions and dialogue, weaken noticeably the direct and powerful impression made upon the spectator by the simple greatness and grand conception of his characters. The *Nibelungenlied* may 'show no trace of creative faculty, either in unity of purpose or style, the proper characteristics of literature;' it may 'not

¹ E. Raupach, *Der Nibelungen Hort*. Hamburg, 1834. It was a very popular stage drama at the time of its appearance and remained in the repertoire of the *Burgtheater* in Vienna till 1857. Cf. *Allgem. Zeitung*, Beilage 227, 228, Sept. 29 and 30, 1891.

² Cf. Röpe, Bulthaupt and others; also R. v. Muth, *Einleitung in das Nibelungenlied*, 1877, p. 419 ff.

have the higher charm of art,' but it is a great poem nevertheless, and notwithstanding the severe criticisms of Lowell.¹ And it is a great poem because of its grand simplicity; its characters are great poetic characters because so one sided; its conflicts so overwhelmingly tragic because they are the conflicts of elemental passions. If a poet weaken any one of these features, he ruins the very essence of the beauty and power of the original.

Furthermore some critics assert that Siegfried is not a 'tragic' character as defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (Chap. XIII, 4). Technically such an objection is unfounded and practically the modern drama does allow the introduction of such guiltless characters—Cordelia, Desdemona, King Duncan and Thekla in *Wallenstein*. And what are Antigone and Cassandra in *Agamemnon* of the ancient drama but 'guiltless' characters?² In its essence, however, the objection is well-grounded, though the root of the trouble lies deeper. It lies in the fascination which the glorious character of Siegfried exercises over poet and public alike. It leads the poet to endow him with all the qualities of beauty, bravery and virtue which we admire in a man, and thus, unintentionally perhaps, to make him the dominating hero, the protagonist, of the first half of the tragedy, throwing out of all balance and perverting the entire plot. The spectators also are carried away by the irresistible charm of the hero, which the poet furthermore sets forth in his most glowing colors, that Siegfried's death will seem to them either an unwarranted brutal murder, and therefore abhorrent; or else, a glorious transfiguration and consequently untragic. The modern poet in dramatizing the *Nibelungensage* has the choice of following either the Norse or the German version, but in either form Siegfried is not and ought not to be made the chief hero of

¹ In his essay on Dante.

² Cf. Günther, *Grundzüge der Tragischen Kunst*. Berlin, 1885, pp. 106, 449, 450. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, &c. London, 1895, p. 287.

the resulting drama. In the old northern story the protagonist is undeniably Brunhild. Once an immortal war-maid, but offending against the will of the Godfather, because of human weakness, and therefore degraded to mortality, though with the promise of the love of the bravest and best of men, she is betrayed, bartered away by her own hero for the love of another woman. In revenge she accomplishes the death of the perjured, though guiltless, lover. But his death is her's also, and the tragedy ends with the beautiful, all-atoning union in death of these two well-mated favorites of the gods, whom the pitiless Norns had sundered in life. In this version of the plot Siegfried is only a secondary character; like Desdemona in Shakspeare's *Othello*, he falls a victim to the conspiring evil powers of fate and human intrigue. To attempt to make him the chief hero is to miss absolutely the tragic essence of the story and to expose the drama to serious dangers of structure, of which later.¹ Into this error Geibel fell. In opera Wagner could, without any serious risk, make Siegfried's character as prominent as he did; the weakness in his drama is due to other causes.

If, on the other hand, the dramatist adopts the version in the *Nibelungenlied*, he will be confronted with the same embarrassing difficulty, for here the leading characters are Chriemhild and Hagen, and the conflict between these two titanic embodiments of loyalty is the theme of the poem. The more one studies the *Lied*, the more prominently this fact stands out, the more one appreciates the greater power and rugged grandeur of the second part of the epic, when these two Titans close for the final conflict. Siegfried's death is really only an episode; his part a subordinate one. The poetic instinct of the early German nations in their creation of the earliest songs underlying their national epic clearly recognized this fact. It may have been the wandering glee-men, when they attempted to put into one connected cycle the scattered independent songs sung among the people; or possi-

¹ Cf. Günther, p. 107 f.; also Butcher, pp. 288, 289, 308, 309.

bly the redactor of the *Nibelungenlied*, when he fixed its present form, who tried to give the various episodes their due proportion in the whole. Since, in the German *Sage*, Chriemhild appeared as the instigator and prime-mover in the destruction of the Burgundians at Etzel's court, in order to avenge the treacherous death of her husband, the old Norse *Sage* demanded an artistic reconstruction. If Chriemhild was to be the central figure, Brunhild must give way to her and be thrust into the background ; the story of her early life, her rescue and betrayal by Siegfried must be reduced to a minimum, in order to palliate the wrong Siegfried had done her. Thus, by making his death a more unwarrantable, heinous crime, the ferocity and ruthlessness of Chriemhild's vengeance is more justified and is poetically more artistic. Yet so powerful was the beautiful myth, so deeply rooted in popular fancy was the old tale of the early loves of Brunhild and Siegfried, that it could not be entirely eradicated, it blossomed through in the new version, though stunted and robbed of all its former beauty and loveliness. In the *Lied*, as we have it to-day, it is an unclear, disturbing element ; it haunts us like a troublesome memory, which we cannot banish and yet the real nature of which we cannot fathom. As in the dramatization of the Norse *Sage*, the attempt to make Siegfried the protagonist of the dramatized *Lied* leads to the same dramatic faults. Either his death will seem untragic, or the attempt to attach to him 'tragic guilt,' will prove offensive or ridiculous when presented upon the stage.

Again, what is the dramatic adapter of the *Lied* to do with Brunhild after Siegfried's death ? Like Siegfried she has served her poetic purpose, but unlike Siegfried, death has not taken her out of the poet's way. The epic simply drops her, without any further concern ; Hebbel treats her even more shabbily, particularly in view of all the dramatic show and splendor of her introduction ; Wilbrandt¹ treats her as does Hebbel ; Raupach makes her drown herself to avoid capture

¹ Adolf Wilbrandt, *Kriemhild*. Wien, 1877.

and disgrace amongst the Huns. Waldmüller¹ makes Providence kindly send down a destructive bolt of lightning for her and his own special benefit. In every case her fate is unsatisfactory from a poetical standpoint and leaves an inartistic blemish in the whole.

If, notwithstanding these risks, the poet deliberately decides to grapple boldly with this danger, to make Siegfried his leading hero, to endow him with all the manly virtues, and yet with guilt enough to dramatically justify his tragic ending, he will come upon a practical difficulty, which has proved the great stumbling block of every one of his predecessors in the same field, the invention of a dramatic episode which will not offend in its presentation on the stage, and yet make perfectly clear to the spectator Siegfried's crime against Brunhild. In the opera, where the music removes the whole action into the domain of feeling and sentiment, and, therefore, of mystery and transcendentalism, the drink of forgetfulness is a thoroughly satisfactory motive even on the stage. In the drama such a device is not permissible when so much of the sequel depends upon it. Consequently the dramatizers of the *Nibelungen* are obliged to recast that part of the plot dealing with the early love of Brunhild and Siegfried, and, for the exciting cause of the former's desire for vengeance and the latter's death, to resort to the same incident (or one based upon it) which is found in the German epic, the fateful subjugation of Brunhild in the bridal chamber, and the theft of her girdle and ring. While this episode told with such *naïveté* in the epic does not offend, on the stage it will always be unsatisfactory and offensive. The feeble substitutions of Wilbrandt, Hebbel and Waldmüller are really more objectionable. Nor, judged by the morals of the times, the ruggedness, yes coarseness of character in the old German heroes, does it seem at all inconsistent with Siegfried's nobility of character to give his wife the girdle and ring taken in such a struggle, for no other reason than 'durch sînen hôhen muot.'² But in none of the

¹ Robt. Waldmüller, *Brunhild*. Dresden, 1863. Reclam, 511.

² Lachmann, *Der Nibelunge Noth*, 6282.

dramas, based upon the epic, has this episode been at all satisfactorily treated. The whole incident of Brunhild's betrayal seems by its nature destined ever to remain a stone of stumbling to the would-be author of a Nibelungen drama. And yet it cannot be omitted; it is too important a link in the chain of dramatic sequence.¹

Finally, according to the consensus of all critics, no one of the modern poets has been able to compress successfully into one drama, or even into a connected series of dramas, the immense mass of subject-matter contained in the *Sage*, nor to shake off entirely the restricting fetters of the old epic form. In discussing Greek tragedy, though the epic elements they retained were considerable, and the long messengers' recitals were even considered artistic, Aristotle nevertheless keeps cautioning constantly against the dangers of the epic structure of the drama. In one passage he gives a piece of information which the Nibelungen dramatizer would do well to ponder over. He says (XVIII, 5): "The poets who have dramatized the whole story of the Fall of Troy, instead of selecting portions, like Euripides, or who, unlike Aeschylus, have taken the whole tale of Niobe, either fail utterly or figure badly on the stage." It is disturbing, almost painful, to see in the best of the Nibelungen dramas the desperate efforts of their authors to force into dramatic form either undramatic elements, or such episodes of the poem as are not presentable on the stage.² Only too frequent are the long epic narratives, in the form of dialogue to be sure, but a dialogue in which one of the characters is degraded to a mere interlocutor. Not less unfrequent is the transparent stage device of making some actor on the stage describe to the others on the stage and to the spectator some event taking place behind the scenes, which would be practically impossible or absurd upon the stage. All dramatists, great and lesser, are obliged to resort to such transparent, mechanical devices, but only when sparingly used are they

¹ Cf. Weitbrecht, pp. 16, 17. Freytag, *Technik*, p. 247.

² Cf. Günther, p. 406.

effective ; frequently employed, they destroy all necessary illusion and kill all the dramatic interest of the spectator.

And yet, though these difficulties have proved serious obstacles to the successful dramatization of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Sage*, successful being used here in the highest sense, in themselves they are not insurmountable, indeed every one of them has been successfully solved by the one or the other of the authors, though no one has solved them all. There is, however, one great difficulty, to which no one before has called attention, but which seems to be by far the most serious, which affects all the others, meets the reconstructing poet at every step and makes it as great an act of madness to try to 'recast the *Nibelungenlied* and *Sage* into a higher form,' as it would be to attempt the same thing with the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. A consideration of this difficulty is interesting and necessary not only in this discussion concerning modern Nibelungen poetry, but seems also to have a general literary interest, which makes a detailed treatment well worth the while.

Forty authors, some of them poets of considerable poetic and dramatic power, have felt called by the Muse, but none has been chosen. They have reconstructed and given new shape to the old mythical stories and epics, but only in 'figures of water and sand,' as Hebbel puts it. And why have they failed? What is the great weakness, the pervading lack of all the modern creations? The greatest defect of all, in a work of poetry, the lack of poetic inspiration, of creative imagination, of artistic invention. The creative phantasy, the 'fine frenzy' of the poet is hemmed and restricted in its attempted flight, the realm of imagination is not clear before it, its poetic images already 'have a local habitation and a name.' There is nothing left for the poet to create, his characters have all received definite shape, yes, the very thoughts in their minds, the words on their lips, and all the details of his plot are already constructed and forced upon him. The poet can only patch and fit together in dramatic form. He is no longer a poet, but simply a dramatizer, a higher kind of dramatic adapter. The materials of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Sage*

had for generations been in the workshop of the poetic phantasy of the Germanic tribes and had been shaped in their main outlines even before the time of the wandering gleemen. They, in their turn, wrought and fashioned until characters and incidents took even more individual forms and relations. Finally came the poet (or *redactor*, if you will) of the *Nibelungenlied* itself, who gathered all the poetic productions of his predecessors and composed (or put together) the *Lied* in its present form—with many imperfections, it may be, but in its conception, its outlines, its simple directness, one of the great poems of the world's literature. What then is left for the imagination of the modern poet? All distinctly poetic work has been done in the past; he can combine anew possibly, but the result will never be a work of poetry in the highest sense, an organic whole, the product of free poetic creation. Hebbel, in the epilogue of *Die Nibelungen*, says of his own work: "The task consisted only in this, to unite into a dramatic chain the episodes of the tragedy and to give them poetic life wherever it was necessary." He has performed his task and done it well, but that is all; the result, however, is not a great drama, but an excellent adaptation, with some poetic power and containing some passages of distinct poetic beauty. This very form of poetic invention Lessing touches upon in the *Laokoon* (Chap. XI). After discussing the definition of 'poetic invention as applied to the plastic arts,' he proceeds to say: "It is invention, but not invention of the whole, but rather of individual parts and of their mutual relations. It is invention of that inferior kind, such as Horace recommended to his tragic poet:

‘*Tuque*

Rectius Iliacum, carmen deducis in actus

*Quam si proferres, ignota indicta primus.*¹

¹*Ars Poetica*, vv. 128–130. Byron (*Hints from Horace*, vv. 183 ff.) paraphrases thus:

‘Tis hard to venture where our betters fail
Or lend fresh interest to a twice told tale.
And yet 'tis perchance wiser to prefer
A hackneyed plot, than to choose a new and err.’

Recommended, I say, but did not command. Recommended as being easier, more convenient, more profitable, but did not command as being better and nobler in itself." If Lessing, whose poetry has always been criticized chiefly because it seems the product of the intellect rather than of fancy, whose *technique*, particularly in the drama, is almost above criticism, speaks so disparagingly of this form of poetic invention, what shall we of to-day, who put phantasy and imagination almost at the very top of poetic qualities, say to the poet who contemplates the dramatization of the old German epic? ¹

But has not the poet the right, which really amounts to an obligation, to change the original, to treat his details with absolute poetic license, and thus to give free range to his imagination and phantasy? Read Waldmüller's *Brunhild*, or plod through extravagant absurdities of Jordan's epic, due to their attempts to free themselves from the influence of their sources and to give free rein to their poetic fancy, and you will be able to appreciate, as in no other way, to what extremes of insipidity and grotesqueness, such license is likely to lead. There is, however, an entirely different aspect of the matter to be considered. The *Nibelungenlied*, for over a century, has been a highly valued, living possession of the cultured world, being continually brought before it in the original, in translations, in prose paraphrases, in works of art, in the figurative

¹ This line of argument applies with equal truth to the dramatization of the modern novel.* Such attempts almost never produce real dramas for the very same reasons; the resulting plays are dialogized stories, generally poorer than their sources and seldom rising above the commonplace. As the dramatic critic, in a recent number of the *Critic* (April 20, '95), said apropos of the dramatization of *Trilby*, 'nobody has ever succeeded or is likely to succeed in really dramatizing a novel.' This is as true of a great epic, as of the novel. Of course, the novels from which Shakspeare obtained his plots are so different from the modern novel that they disprove nothing above stated (cf. Freytag, *Technik*, p. 299).

* Since writing this note the attention of the writer has been called to an essay by Brander Matthews, entitled *The Dramatization of Novels* in his *Studies of the Stage* (New York, Harpers, 1894). This essay discusses this subject in detail and, with the knowledge of a recognized authority, establishes conclusively the truth of the above conclusions.

language of poetry, history and politics.¹ Its story and its characters are so well known that almost the slightest change in the original will immediately excite notice. And, with the strong pragmatic and realistic make-up of our minds, we either mentally protest at such a change, or else cannot give ourselves up to the full enjoyment of the poetry, while our mind is distracted with questions of fact. The theorist may declaim against such philistinism and plead the sovereign rights of poetic freedom, but he cannot do away with the fact. The ordinary spectators or readers resent any violation of what is to them an actuality and the cultured will find themselves in a constant state of indignant protest against the irreverential disregard of what is to them an almost sacred possession, the hallowed traditions and creations of the poetry of the past.²

¹And to these all must be added the tremendous popularity and familiarity of Wagner's operas, which, as dramas pure and simple, fall far short of being a worthy re-creation of the old saga, but yet in which the composer, in the realm of *another* and that too of the preëminently *modern* art, music, has given the highest and worthiest modern expression to the pervading spirit, sentiment and passion of the old Germanic *Siegfriedsage*. It might be well to bear in mind also, that, of the operas constituting the *Nibelungen* tetralogy, the one generally considered the greatest and most effective, both musically and dramatically, is *Die Walküre*, the materials for which Wagner found in the crudest state.

²A part of this paper was first read before the Modern Language Club of Yale University. After its reading Dr. Corwin called the attention of the writer to the subjoined passage in Kuno Fischer's *Goethes Faust*, which is such a direct and complete confirmation of the position above asserted, that a full quotation of the passage in question hardly needs an apology. The quotation follows Wolcott's translation (Manchester, Iowa, 1895), p. 8.

"There are two quite opposite ways in which it is possible to make a mistake in the choice of materials for poems, and thus produce works which have no natural relation to the people for whom they are intended. This is the case when materials are taken which have no previous history in the minds of men of the age; which have not been handed down, felt and lived. . . .

"The other and opposite way is followed when materials are chosen, which by no means lack a previous history in the hearts of men, which are, in fact, most amply possessed of this essential—subjects which for centuries have occupied the soul and imagination of each succeeding genera-

The analogy between Nibelungen dramas and historical dramas is a very striking one in many respects, but particularly in the following features, namely, the restriction of poetic invention in following the sources too closely; the great danger at the present day of digressing from these sources; and the difficulty in the dramatic representation of

tion; but which have acquired such an authentic, familiar and inviolable form that we cannot wean ourselves from it, nor do we care to do so; form and matter have become so inseparable that the latter cannot be detached and transformed in the poet's workshop. *A subject which has a definite and established form familiar to the whole world should not be remodeled and treated with caprice by the poet.* No poet can vie with the Bible in the representation of biblical subjects.*

"Klopstock, when he set his hand to the composition of *The Messiah* made one of the most notable and most instructive mistakes of this sort in the history of our literature. Yet Klopstock was a true poet, and the spirit of the time was most favorable to his work.

"With Goethe's *Faust* it is quite different. Here the materials had become familiar to the people through association, but were, at the same time, in a very rude form (in the original: *ungestaltet und roh*) as yet. The grand features were, it is true, here and there discernible, but they lay buried in the raw material, being by this restrained as though in a chrysalis."

The following remarks by Andrew Lang in his *Introductory Essay to Le Morte D'Arthur*, vol. III of Sommer's edition (London, 1891), are also to the point. In the beginning of the essay he speaks of the familiarity of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* to the English people and of its great popularity. Later, in speaking of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, he says the following:

"The *Idylls*, on the other side, have a purpose, a purpose which the ancient romance unavoidably suggests, but which is not of a piece with the legend. New wine is put into old bottles. It may be doubted whether a poet is well advised when he deliberately treats the theme of another age in the spirit of to-day. . . . Or is this feeling (*i. e.*, of the inconsistency of modern versions of romance) only part of our haunting archæological pedantry which, content with the heroes in the garb of their day, is vexed to find them familiar with our own involved speech, and more involved thought?"—Pp. xxii, xxiii. "Admirable as his (Tennyson's) words are for wisdom and music, and imperishable in our memories, the voice is not the voice of the Arthur whom we know" (p. xxiii).

*Milton's *Paradise Lost* is the exception which proves the rule. For, it is generally conceded, that those parts of that epic show the greatest poetic power and beauty which are *not* based upon the biblical narrative, as the whole conception of Satan and his host with their councils and their machinations, but have been derived from Biblical 'hints, to which he gave such marvelous expansion.'

well-known and popular historical heroes. Lessing, in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (chapters 23, 24, 31, 33, 34), insists most strongly upon the right of poetic license in dealing with the facts of history in the drama, though insisting equally vigorously upon a rigid adherence to the characters of the historical personages represented. Lessing's views here, as always, are thoroughly sound in the main, but are somewhat dogmatic and too sweeping; furthermore, they have been decidedly modified, both by the development of art and literature, and by the onward march of civilization.¹ However, we may deplore the fact, the Nineteenth century is scientific and realistic to the last degree, and demands these same qualities of its stage and drama. And so, while Freytag's *Technik des Dramas* does not compare in keenness of judgment, breadth and depth of thought, and range of critical power with the *Dramaturgie*, while it may be a trifle mechanical, smack of philistinism and lack the highest and most delicate literary appreciation, yet it is thoroughly representative of the Nineteenth Century views and represents the sound sense of the large body of the best dramatic critics of to-day. Freytag rejects the *Nibelungenlied* entirely as a source of dramatic subjects, finds the Middle Ages particularly unsuitable for dramatic treatment² and, in the following quotations, seems to me to point out the great obstacles and difficulties which the poet meets when he undertakes to dramatize history. And, as a mere source of dramatic material, the *Nibelungenlied* and *Sage* are as real to both poet and public as any historical narrative, its episodes and its persons are as actual as though they had really occurred and lived in the past centuries; in point of fact, they probably have a stronger hold on the mind and memory than the facts of pragmatic history. Substituting then *Nibelungensage* for the word 'history' where it occurs, and making the other slight changes necessary, Freytag's following words of advice ought to be well pondered and

¹ Cf. Erich Schmidt, *Lessing*, II, 121.

² Freytag, p. 247 f.; cf. also Vischer, *Asthetik*, Vol. III, pp. 1421, 1422.

heeded by every aspiring poet who feels called to put another Nibelungen drama into the world. He says (p. 239): "It is a matter of course that the poet will conserve faithfully the traditions of history where they serve his purpose and where they do not stand in his way. For our times, so advanced in the knowledge of history and former social conditions, keep a watchful eye upon the historical training of their dramatists. The young poet should take care not to give his heroes too little of their times, nor too much that is modern and inappropriate, and that modern sentiment in the characters should not seem to the cultured spectator contrary to the limitations and peculiarities of the soul-life of that olden time."

In treating of the changes every poet is constrained to make in the historical characters of any period, he gives the following warning to the dramatist (p. 256):

"The poet will ask himself whether the changes which he is obliged to make in every character of the past will not possibly become so great, that every resemblance of his picture to the historical period will disappear, and whether the ineradicable presuppositions of the plot have not become incompatible with a free treatment of it." Again (p. 37), "For as faith begins where knowledge ends, so poetry begins where history stops. Whatever history narrates ought to be to the poet only the frame into which he paints his brilliant colors, the most secret revelation of human nature; how can room and inward freedom be left to him if he consumes his best power in the presentation of a series of historical events." After an unfavorable criticism of Shakspeare's *Henry VIII.*, because of its too exact portrayal of the king, he reaches this conclusion (p. 238): "For similar reasons, it is a very difficult matter to introduce historical characters whose portrait has become popular, as that of Luther or Frederick the Great." Again on the same point (p. 299): "Furthermore, the conscientious poet in dealing with the not very numerous historical heroes who still live on in the memory of the people will discover new difficulties, which will restrict the freshness of his

creative powers." And similarly (p. 62): "The characters of Shakspeare, Goethe, Schiller are even worse off in the stage than in the novel or romance. All the worse, the more intimately their lives are known." Bearing these precepts in mind and searching the Nibelungen dramas, it would not be a hard task to find illustration upon illustration of mistakes and blemishes, which resulted from not heeding the sound advice contained in the above cited words of warning.¹ It

¹ It is interesting to note that Shakspeare's greatest dramas are *not* his chronicle histories, but those drawn from the simple, crude novels and tales, which he could shape with unrestricted poetic license (cf. Freytag, p. 38). Of his histories those are generally considered weakest and poorest in which he followed his historical sources most closely, *e. g.*, *Henry VI.* and *Henry VIII.*; those are regarded as his best in which he gave freest play to his creative imagination, *e. g.*, *Henry IV.*, Parts 1 and 2. As Ten Brink said (*Lectures on Shakspeare*, New York, 1895, pp. 158, 159): "In reality politics and patriotism—not aesthetics alone—filled a very important part in the historical dramas of that time, and plays of this kind cannot be judged from the point of view of strict dramatic theory. The necessity of paying altogether unusual regard to the underlying story, the refractory character of that story, the abundance of facts and figures, the multitude of inevitable premises—all this does not, in many ways, allow the poet that symmetrical working out and transparent combination of motives, that intensifying of characteristics; above all, that concentration of dramatic interest, which theory justly demands of the drama" (cf. also Alois Brandl, *Shakspeare*, Berlin, 1894, pp. 59 ff., 212 ff.; Günther, pp. 348, 349; Barrett Wendell, *William Shakspeare*, New York, 1894, pp. 59, 212). Apparent exceptions are the three great Roman tragedies, *Julius Cæsar*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*. It would not be begging the question, nor an evasion of the point at issue, to say simply in regard to these, that everything is possible to the supreme genius, such as Shakspeare was. But that is not at all necessary. It is to be urged in explanation of these seeming exceptions, that the period of their composition was particularly favorable for the creation of the first two, as *Julius Cæsar* may be but the poetic public expression of the national feeling of that period, and *Coriolanus* the reflection of a great contemporaneous political event (Brandl, pp. 148, 149; 167, 168). While *Cleopatra* in herself is a most grateful theme for dramatic treatment, so that 'she has furnished the subject of two Latin, sixteen French, six English, and at least four Italian tragedies' (Rolfé, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Introduction, p. 22, from Mrs. Jameson's *Characteristics of Women*). Then it might be said, that the history of Rome is a source unusually rich in tragic conflicts, eminently adapted for dramatic representation, as Vischer claims (*Ästhetik*, Vol. III, pp. 1421, 1422). But, entirely

would be most wholesome for the aspiring dramatist of the *Nibelungen* to go through such a series of correcting exercises; the failures of the past might deter him from plunging too blindly into the practically hopeless task before him.¹

apart from even these considerations, it is to be noted that, in the first place, Plutarch has colored his characters and incidents with a view to poetic and dramatic effect. And, in the second place, a careful investigation and detailed comparison of the three dramas with their sources, would probably show that many, if not the majority, of the strongest scenes and incidents are those for which Shakspeare found his materials in Plutarch, either in crudest form or only hinted at. Which is the case in *Coriolanus*, and particularly so in the relations between Marc Antony and Cleopatra as represented by the poet, and in the brilliant dramatic portrayal of the latter (cf. Brandl, pp. 171, 187; also Wright's and Rolfe's editions of those two plays in their Introductions). In the third place, Shakspeare has dealt freely with his materials, wherever it suited his purpose, unmindful of his Plutarch, and has 'thrown a rich mantle of poetry over all, which is often wholly his own.' Even in *Julius Cæsar* (notwithstanding Trench's statement, quoted in Wright's edition, p. XLV, that "It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the whole play . . . is to be found in Plutarch"), he has so changed his source that, *e. g.*, in the case of *Cicero*, 'the vain senator of Plutarch has become in Shakspeare a complete caricature, which has probably led many a modern historian to an unjust conception of him' (cf. Brandl, p. 147).

Schiller's historical dramas are peculiarly interesting in this connection. The greatest, *Wallenstein*, deals with a hero whose real character and inner purposes are still a matter of controversy amongst historians. The same fact is true of *Maria Stuart*; it was true of *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* at Schiller's time, as well as of *Don Carlos* and of *Fiesko*, to a certain extent, so that Schiller, in almost every case, chose an interesting, unknown and really dubious character, and hence was free to shape his materials as suited his own fancy and dramatic purpose. Even in these, those are the particularly dramatic and powerful parts for which he received only the slightest or else no hints at all in his historic sources, *e. g.*, the character of Posa and his famous interview with Philipp; the great scene (Act. III, scene 4) between Mary Stuart and Elizabeth, and the whole character and episode of Mortimer; the episode of Thekla and Max in the *Wallenstein*. For *Wilhelm Tell* modern investigation shows that there is no historical foundation at all; but, anyway, as Bellermann (*Schiller's Dramen*, Zweiter Theil, p. 346) says: "The power of this poetic creation lies rather in the individual, sublime and agreeable, affecting or overpowering pictures which are put before us as well as in the noble spirit which pervades and illuminates it than in the bold outline of the whole."

¹ Cf., for this entire paragraph, Günther, p. 393.

It might seem to some that the entire line of argument followed above, which is meant to decide against the practical possibility of a successful dramatization of the Nibelungen epic, is entirely refuted by the great tragedies of the Greek dramas—a body of dramatic literature, second to none in the world, a proud position conceded by all nations, ancient as well as modern. It might be said: “If the materials of these tragedies were taken to such a very great extent from the myths and epics of Greece, why should not our modern poets be able to repeat these literary achievements and create a modern drama or series of dramas based on a modern epic source, which will rank equally high?” A brief consideration of the nature of the Greek drama, of the character of the epical and mythical sources, and the use the Greek tragedians made of them, and also of the history of the rise and decline of the classical Greek tragedy will, however, tend to confirm the conclusions reached above, rather than to weaken their validity. In the first place, a Greek tragedy represents a climax¹ and not a development, which means, that all the antecedents of the plot are known to the audience or else related in the prologue. Occasionally these may be embodied in a choral ode, in a rhetorical monologue (*Rhesis*), or in a lyrical dialogue between one of the actors and the chorus (the *Commos*). In any case the poet was relieved of all the difficulties of the dramatic exposition—one of the chief difficulties in the way of modern dramatists, particularly of the *Nibelungenlied*. Furthermore, owing partly to the origin of the Greek drama, partly to the fondness of the Athenians for public recitals of the epic poems, and also to restrictions to movement and action upon the stage caused by the actor’s costume, epic recitals of even the most important dramatic events were considered artistic features of the drama rather than blemishes, such as the modern author avoids where possible. If such recitals were permissible on the modern stage, more than half the difficulty of dramatizing the *Nibelungensage* would vanish.

¹ Cf. Butcher, p. 336 f.

The Greek drama too represents the conflict of simple forces and characters ;¹ seldom do the latter, even in Euripides, embody that complexity of passion and emotion which is one of the essential features of the modern dramatic hero. Simplicity of motive and passion is the distinguishing mark of the characters of the *Nibelungensage*. It is in giving to these one sided characters the complexity of modern individuality where the poet always fails. The hero of the Greek tragedy, furthermore, appears only in one great crisis of life. While, to be sure, in such a situation the entire character may be epitomized, yet the Greek poet was relieved almost entirely of that complex characterization demanded in the romantic drama, which places its heroes in many varying situations, in order to illuminate his character from every possible side. The dialogue of the Greek drama is in structure simple, severe and unornate like Greek architecture, seldom, if ever, approaching the complicated, sensuously figurative and profusely ornamented style of the romantic Shakspere, for instance. The purely poetical passages are to be found in the choral odes, the lyrical dialogues of actor and chorus, or in the set rhetorical *rhesis*. In this feature, also, the Nibelungen playwrights have failed ; sentimental, poetical speeches from the lips of the rugged characters of the old *Sage* always seem incongruous. Again, the moralizing reflexions on life and man, and on the great problem of human destiny are left to the Greek chorus ; the characters lack that intense consciousness of self and self-introspection of the modern man. Here again the nature of the Greek drama allowed the classical tragedians to avoid what is a rock of offense in the Nibelungen dramatizations with their 'iron-heroes' and 'titanic women.' Finally, the sacred character of the Greek dramas, the powerful aid of music and the religious dance carried the whole performance into an exalted sphere, the region of mystery, and made many features effective and dramatic which would seem unreal and impossible in modern tragedy. What the aid of music alone

¹ Cf. Butcher, p. 332 f. ; Günther, pp. 86, 197, 344, 345.

can do, how, with its mighty, entrancing power, it can carry us into supernatural realms and make us accept in the opera what in the ordinary drama the spectator would reject entirely as impossible or ridiculous, we can see in Wagner's *Nibelungen Ring*, in which gods and giants, water-nymphs and cloud-maidens, the dragon and the woodland-bird, the magic-cloak and the cup of forgetfulness are as real to us as they would be to the child in a fairy tale.

Welcker, in *Die Griechischen Tragödien mit Rücksicht auf den Epischen Cyclus* (Bonn, 1839), has investigated the titles and sources of all known Greek dramas and dramatic fragments, and has shown that only a very small number were based upon the highly artistic *Iliad* and *Odyssey*,¹ but that by far the most were drawn from the lesser epics and the old Greek family myths;² that is, from such sources in which were to be found only the crude outlines of the plots and almost no artistic development of characters and motives. They were practically like the novel sources from which Shakspeare took so many of his plots. Full freedom was allowed the poet to create details, to fill in the outlines as the poetic demands of his drama required, and to vary his sources as long as no complete change of the main features was attempted.³ The Greek poets had not all the details of their plot given as they are fixed for the modern poet in the *Nibelungenlied*; their characters were not developed to the minutest detail as is the case with Siegfried, Brunhild, and all the Nibelungen heroes and heroines. And very seldom, if ever, do they take over as

¹Of the 78 tragedies attributed to Aeschylus only 28 are taken from the poems dealing with the Trojan War; and only 3 from the *Iliad* and the same number from the *Odyssey*. To Sophocles are attributed 86 tragedies, of which 44 are from the Trojan Epic Cycle, but only one is based upon the *Iliad* and 3 upon the *Odyssey*. Euripides found in the Trojan cyclic poems subjects for 28 of his 68 tragedies; only *one* (1) was taken from the *Iliad* and *one* (1)—about which, however, there is some uncertainty—from the *Odyssey*.

²Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, xxiii, 4; xiii, 5.

³Aristotle, xiv, 4 f.; cf. Welcker; Butcher, p. 331.

a whole the speech or language of their source, entirely unlike the modern Nibelungen dramatists, who do this frequently. Nor, as has already been mentioned, did they attempt to crowd into one drama or trilogy the entire Iliad or any entire cycle of myths, as our modern poets feel constrained to do with the story of the Nibelungen. And in addition to all this, it is to be remembered that the personages of the old Greek epics and myths, in point of development of character, morals and culture, were, by no means, as far removed from the Greeks of the fourth century before Christ as are the heroes of the *Nibelungensage* from the men of our own times. The men of Homer's time stood nearer the gods, were more heroic in the true sense than the Athenians of the time of Sophocles, to be sure, but the sacred character of the drama, the noble dignity and gravity of the actors, due both to convention and mechanical limitations, made such idealized tragic heroes necessary. But modern realism hardly endures their introduction even into the opera, and it requires all the genius of Wagner's noblest music to keep up the illusion and make possible the appearance of gods and superhuman characters upon the stage of to-day.

The history of the rise and decline of the Greek drama substantiates in the main the position taken in this paper, namely, that a poet who attempts to recast into the same or a different poetic form a subject, which has been poetically developed before him in a form which is widely and favorably known, will generally fail of success, or will be forced to such changes of the original, that the identity of the latter is entirely lost. Aeschylus, the predecessor and guide of Sophocles in the exploiting of the Homeric and Cyclic poems for dramatic materials,¹ stood much nearer in time and in spirit to the dithyrambic origin of the Greek drama, and, hence, in his dramas the religious elements were more prominent. The characters in his tragedies are, as a general thing, not individuals, but simply representatives of man in general,

¹ Welcker, p. 1.

who in human pride and passion have offended against the immutable laws of the gods and fate. They possess but little individuality and no complexity of character.¹ The plots too were used only to preach the great sermons of reverence for the gods and religion, and, as long as Aeschylus preserved their religious character, he felt himself free to treat the stories of his sources with perfect poetic license.² When Sophocles, 'the tragic Homer,' began working the rich mine of the old epics, he found them practically untouched; Aeschylus had worked only the surface veins. Sophocles humanized the old stories and the heroes, he molded them into dramatic forms and characters 'more suited to the new times—the wider horizon and the new standpoint for viewing and judging man.'³ He gave to the plots and characters greater depth and greater complexity. 'His fame rests upon his great dramatic technique and psychological poetic inventiveness.'⁴

The treasures had been exhausted when Euripides entered upon his literary career; he soon abandoned the epic poems and turned in all directions for new materials, to unexploited Greek myths, to those of Italy and even invented some new plots of his own.⁵ So great were these changes, so little reverence had he for the sacred character of the old myths and traditions, that his tragedies are generally considered to mark the decline of the Greek drama and to have dealt both poetry and art a serious blow. He seems to have appreciated, (as it would be well for the modern Nibelungen dramatist to do also), that there was no chance for great poetic productions where the field was so limited, and no longer offered fresh materials to work with. He was a great poet, and his tragedies are great poetical creations, but they are not 'Homeric' in any sense of the term; nor does one of them embody any older epic, or any part of it, in a 'higher form.' It is evident that he felt and tried to avoid the same limitations to poetic

¹ Günther, pp. 85, 86.

² Welcker, p. 91.

³ Welcker, p. 92.

⁴ Cf. *sup.*, 3; cf. Freytag, p. 123 f., p. 144; Günther, p. 58.

⁵ Cf. Welcker, II, pp. 459, 460.

treatment of dramatic materials taken from familiar epic sources as the modern poet does in the treatment of similarly derived materials.¹ He too was forced to make great changes and resort to new inventions as our poets are, but he was more fortunate, for his public finally lost, as he had himself, the respect and reverence for the old poems and myths, while in the modern public the reverence for the dignity and sacredness of the old poetic possessions is growing steadily stronger. We demand a closer following of the original, and thus bar the way to irreverent plundering, and practically prevent the possibility of remodeling, into another higher or similar form, a subject which has already received an artistic form from an earlier poet whose work we have learned to love.

This leads, finally, to the consideration of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Sage* in modern epic poetry; a discussion not introduced before in order to avoid confusion, and because many of the considerations urged in regard to Nibelungen dramatizations apply with the same cogency, if not with greater, to the attempt to reconstruct from one epic poem, or cycle of epic poems—which, defective though it be, has yet gained a hold upon the hearts and imagination of the people—another with the same materials. Only two² such epic reproductions deserve any consideration, *Die Nibelunge* of Jordan, and *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung* by William Morris. The former consisting of two parts, *die Sigfridsage* and *Hildebrant's Heimkehr*, is an attempt to utilize in one long continuous epic all the versions of the *Nibelungensage*, together with the old

¹ Butcher, p. 332; Freytag, p. 135; Günther, pp. 192, 197, 215, 232.

² It was impossible to secure for this discussion the other epics, viz.:

G. Pfarrius, *Chriemhildens Rache, ein erzählendes Gedicht*.

W. Wegener, *Siegfried und Chriemhild: Eine poetische Gestaltung der Nibelungensage*, 1867.

Werner Hahn, *Kriemhilde: Ein Volksgesang der Deutschen*. Yet, from the fact that they receive such scanty mention, wherever they are mentioned, and that no mention of them at all can be found in the standard histories of German literature, it does not seem wrong to conclude that they hardly deserve consideration in this discussion.

Hildebrandsage, and to fill out with characters and incidents drawn from every possible corner of Germanic *Sages* in general. It is written in rhymeless alliterative verse, more complex, varied and pliable than the old German verse-types, and displays great skill and talent of versification on the part of the author. Jordan had traveled all through Germany, Austria, and in parts of America, giving public recitals and improvisations and, profiting by the experience and criticism thus gained, produced a poem which is surely popular, both in contents and form. It contains many passages of real poetic power and beauty, others of noticeable sweetness and delicacy, and reveals throughout great facility and a certain art of composition. But, in spite of these good features, it proves conclusively the truth of the conclusions reached above, it betrays on every page the futility of the poet's attempt to 'restore' and reconstruct the old *Nibelungenlied* in complete and comprehensive form. Where Jordan follows the *Sage*, he is weak and flippant, belittles the *Sage* and robs it of its grand simplicity. He transforms all its rugged heroic characters into the colorless, sentimental or intriguing characters of a poor modern novel, though he tries to incorporate and symbolize in them great ethical and moral principles. He destroys the chief charm of every feature, its unconscious naturalness. The 'modern' features which he introduces in his desire to humanize and infuse 'modern culture' into the old myths are absurd, and even worse.¹ Countless minor im-

¹An extreme criticism of Jordan's work is to be found in v. Muth's *Einleitung in das Nibelungenlied*, which, with all its humorously extravagant zeal, does strike right at the greatest weaknesses of that production. He says (p. 416): W. Jordans *Nibelunge* sind ein widerliches Product formgewandten Raffinements; bedenkt man dass dieses Werk, 33000 Langzeilen lang d. h. 4 mal so lang als der *Nibelunge Not*, um die Hälfte länger als der *Parzival* oder so lang wie ein Dutzend fünfactiger Trauerspiele, in einer Sprache und Form, die nie gesprochen und nie gebraucht wurde, ritterliche Vorstellungen des xiv. und Rohheit des iv. Jahrhunderts, olympisches Göttergeplauder und mittelalterliches Hexenwesen zu einem unerträglichen Gemisch zusammen würfelt, so wird der affectierte Beifall, den es vielfach

perfections on almost every page emphasize continually the vast difference between a really great poem and an ingenious poetical composition. And as all such attempts must result, Jordan has produced what Gottschall¹ characterizes as: *eine Monstredichtung, welche aus den erratischen Blöcken der Vorzeit ihre gigantischen—and it might be added, und grotesken—Gestalten und Gedanken meisselt*. Jordan in his *Epilog* speaks of himself as the bard who

Erneuert das Lied von den Nibelungen
Und in Sigfridsage und Hildebrants Heimkehr
Die heilige Halle des Heldenthums
Aus verwitterten Resten wieder gewölbt hat
Zum zeitendurchdauernden doppelten Dom.

The poem reminds the reader rather of one of those churches such as are to be found in Rome, for the construction of which the old temples have been robbed of their beautiful carved marbles and stately pillars. We may admire the ingenuity and skill of the architect in utilizing his plundered materials, but what there is of real beauty is the work of the ancient artists and builders. The spectator cannot help but regret that the grand old ruins have been despoiled to adorn the modern structure of pieces and of patches.

gefunden, halb unbegreiflich; dass sein Autor Präntension erhebt, den Gedanken und die Form verlorener Dichtung wiederzugeben, ist lächerlich; dass der alte Hildebrand visionär von Locomotiven, Blitzableitern und Telegraphen träumt, ist abgeschmackt; dass aber die Recken der Vorzeit als moderne „Culturkämpfer“ dargestellt werden und Hildebrand der Stammvater des Zollernhauses sein soll, ist nicht Patriotismus, auch nicht Chauvinismus oder Wohldienerei, sondern das ist, . . . die ganze elende und gemeine Marktschreierei, die sich nicht entblödet Dinge und Motive, die zu ernst sind für solche Entwürdigung, für den immer gähnenden Geldsack auszu-beuten, und die darum einmal nach Gebühr gebrandmarkt werden soll (cf. also Burckhard, *Allgem. Zeitung*, Beilage, Nos. 227 and 228, Sept. 29, 30, 1891).

For a different, laudatory criticism, cf. Røpe, p. 106. In view of such criticism as Røpe's, Jordan would have good reason to pray to be delivered from his friends.

¹*Deut. Nat'litt. d. 19ten Jhts.*, Vol. 3, p. 446.

Entirely different is *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung* by William Morris, which has been called, rather extravagantly, 'the greatest epic of the Nineteenth century.' Its structure may not be as artistic as that of Jordan's poem; the verse is less flexible and light, in fact rather heavy and monotonous for the best effects in varying situations; the alliteration, which Morris employs to some extent, is not nearly as artistically and effectively handled, but, as an organic whole, the poem stands far above the rhapsodizings of the German poet, in tone, in poetical power and in epic dignity. Nowhere does it descend to the triviality, the obscure disturbing mysticism and symbolism, the political and philosophic tendency of Jordan's *Nibelunge*. Nor is it, like the latter, a conglomerate pile of epical materials appropriated from every source, though cleverly arranged in a massive, showy whole, but it is a noble, though less ambitious and ornate, structure, built on a simple plan, with its blocks quarried and shaped from the *Volsungensage*, stately and impressive in its dignified simplicity. The English poet found his materials in the crude Norse *Saga*, roughly hewn, it is true, but not spoiled for his purpose and full of artistic potentiality. His artistic genius was almost unrestricted, he could practically hew and carve as he pleased, and give free rein to his creative phantasy. His materials in the rough were given him, the general plan of structure was prescribed, but with that material, and within that plan he was free to arrange and vary with entire artistic license. The variations from the original are comparatively few, chiefly of omission and condensation, though here and there the outlines and connecting lines were more clearly and sharply brought out.

The first three books is occupied with the story of Brunhild and Siegfried, the fourth contains the story of the Fall of the Niblungs, which follows the more poetical and modern version of the *Nibelungenlied*. Chriemhild urges Atli on to the destruction of the Burgundians, but takes no active part herself, though, like a Goddess of vengeance, she looms up and

hovers over it all. Her own end follows the narrative of the Norse *Saga*; after slaying Atli and setting fire to the palace, she throws herself into the sea. This whole fourth book seems to confirm the point made in the early part of the paper, that whether in drama or epic, when Brunhild is made the central figure, Chriemhild is necessarily forced into the background and becomes a secondary figure. Morris does not lose the sense of proportion in the least, yet the reader feels that with Brunhild's death the story has reached its artistic end. *The Fall of the Niblungs* begins a new cycle, satisfies the curiosity of the reader, perhaps his sense of poetic justice, but, on the whole, seems an inorganic, inartistic supplement to the Brunhild tragedy. *The Story of Sigurd* is open to criticism in other respects, it often palls upon the reader, is prolix and repetitious, it often shows that the poet is nodding. It is also too sombre and continuously gloomy; it is pervaded with the Nineteenth century *Weltschmerz*, for the poet has failed to catch the sunny brightness of the Siegfried story, and also that death-defying joyousness which marked the northern heroes in the midst of the most tragic situations, and which we feel all through the second part of the *Nibelungenlied* as being the great reconciling feature to Hagen's character. The characters and the localities seem vague and misty, and, as the reader lays aside the book, there comes over him a feeling, that it all was not real. In other words, the poet has not been able to strip off his Nineteenth century culture and catch the simple epic spirit of the original. Yet, as a work of pure poetic creation, it stands above all others based upon either the *Sage* or the *Lied*. And, no doubt, much of its success is due to the fact that the poet took for his plot the crude, simple prose tale of the *Volsungensage*, which gave his creative imagination full scope for the exercise of its powers. But it is no 'higher form' of the *Sage* than the *Nibelungenlied*, it will never take the latter's place; it will hardly be read to supplement the latter's faulty and unclear version of the Brunhild episode.

It will ever remain, what it pretends to be, an earnest, dignified poetic version of the *Volsungensage*, and no more.

It would be unsatisfactory to leave this subject without some notice of the modern re-creations of the old Arthurian cycle, of which only Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* can claim attention in this connection. The analogies between these and the modern reproductions of the *Nibelungensage* are numerous, and will be clear to anyone who will consider the two at all carefully. This subject of the modern re-creation of the Arthurian cycle by Tennyson, touched upon by many, but by none exhaustively discussed, requires a far fuller and more intelligent treatment than this paper can hope to give; it can hope to present only a few points for consideration, which, however, will tend to corroborate the position it is trying to maintain.

In the first place, it seems an utter impossibility at the present time to pass any final judgment upon the value and beauty of the *Idylls*, either as works of poetry, or as re-creations of the *Morte Darthur*, while the critics utter such utterly contradictory opinions concerning them. The one¹ says: 'In music of rhythm, in beauty of diction, in richness of illustration, they are unsurpassed;' while it is the opinion of Swinburne that 'there is little in them beyond dexterity, a rare eloquence, a laborious patience of hand;' and he would 'deny them, not only epical merit, but any transcendent merit at all.' According to one critic:² 'The *Idylls* are a poem almost perfect in unity of design and proportion of parts;' while another³ asserts that 'Tennyson has effected this divergence (of a certain romance from Malory's version) at the sacrifice of unity, consistency and beauty.' Maccallum⁴ says of Tennyson's alterations of the original: 'His alterations are not distortions; they

¹ Van Dyke, *The Poetry of Tennyson* (3rd. Ed.), New York, 1892, p. 162.

² Littledale, *Essays on Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King*, London, and New York, 1893, p. 11.

³ Gurteen, *The Arthurian Epic*, New York, 1895, p. 307.

⁴ *Tennyson's Idylls and Arthurian Story*, New York, 1894, p. 316.

never strike one as impertinent, they are in the right line of development ;' while Stopford Brooke,¹ in criticizing the episode of Tristram and Isolt, remarks: 'Tennyson ought to have had more reverence for a great tale. . . . No one has a right to alter out of recognition two characters in one of the great poetic stories of the world and to blacken them. . . . To make a great tale in this fashion the stalking horse of morality, . . . to degrade characters which are not degraded is an *iniquity* in art.' Finally Maccallum sums up his opinion of the *Idylls* in these words:² 'It might even be said that they deliver the classic version of that story as a whole, and present it *in the highest perfection of which it is capable* ;' while Gurteen concludes³ (almost in the very words of Weibrecht in regard to the *Nibelungen* re-creations): 'Even Tennyson failed to produce an epic of chivalry, and the theme awaits the fashioning touch of some future poet.' But, whatever be our opinion of the *Idylls* as poetry and works of art, we must remember distinctly that they never pretended to be an *epic*, a re-creation in 'the higher form of epic poetry' of the prose epic of Malory. In his choice of the name, *Idylls*, Tennyson publicly and emphatically disavows any such desire on his part. His zealous, but injudicious, admirers do him a wrong in calling them by such an ambitious name. They may call them 'Tennysonian,' or 'idyllic epics,' 'epics in miniature,' what they will, but they are not 'epics' (or an 'epic') as the word has been established in meaning. Whether Tennyson himself recognized that 'his peculiar genius was not suited to the production of an epic,' as Maccallum⁴ says, or that, as Lang claims,⁵ 'a new epic is an impossibility,' because 'the age has not the epic spirit ;' or, that the poet realized the fact that, in spite of all its shortcomings, *Le Morte Darthur* could never be successfully recast into a higher epic form, it is enough to

¹ Stopford Brooke, *Tennyson*, New York, 1894, pp. 346, 347.

² Cf. p. 2.

³ Cf. p. 88.

⁴ Cf. p. 308.

⁵ Introduction to Sommer's edition of *Morte Darthur*, London, 1891, III, XXII.

know, that 'he had contemplated an Arthurian epic and had *abandoned it after severe labor as impracticable.*' The *Idylls*, therefore, cannot and ought not be judged by the same standards as the Nibelungen dramas and epics, for they make no pretense to belonging to the same class.

But granting that the *Idylls* are successful poetic re-creations of the *Arthurian* story, still they prove nothing in regard to the possibility of producing similar results from recasting the *Nibelungenlied* and *Sage*; the antecedent and attendant conditions are so entirely different in the two cases. Considered merely as a source for poetic materials, Malory's *Morte Darthur* is in a far cruder condition than the *Nibelungenlied*. It is prose, in unpolished form, prolix, self-contradictory in parts, and confused in arrangement.¹ Even Sommer² warns against 'rating him (Malory) too highly. To put it mildly his work is very unequal.' Tennyson was more fortunate, then, than are his fellow poets in their *Nibelungen* reproductions, in regard to his sources at least. But not only in that respect, he also had the field practically clear before him. For, although there had been others who had gone to the same sources for materials, as Maccallum shows in his history of the story, yet their work had hardly made any impression upon the world and was practically forgotten when Tennyson first commenced writing. How different from the state of things in the field of German literature! And, in a third respect, Tennyson was more favorably placed. For, it is probably true, notwithstanding Andrew Lang to the contrary, that 'among ordinary readers Tennyson's *Idylls* are a great deal more read than Malory's romance,'³ and that the popular interest in Malory is probably due to the *Idylls* rather than that the reverse is the case, as is true of the *Nibelungen* re-creations, which owe whatever interest they arouse chiefly to the source from which they are drawn.

¹ Cf. Maccallum, pp. 93, 94.

² *The Sources of Le Morte Darthur* (London, 1891, III, 294).

³ Maccallum, p. 289.

Finally we must bear in mind, as has already been touched upon before,¹ that the one general objection which the adverse critics, Swinburne, Lång, Rhys, Brooke, Gurteen, make to the *Idylls*, is that the poet has failed to reproduce the spirit of the old *Arthur* story, and that our enjoyment of them is always marred by the conflict between the modern version and our recollection of the old story; that the infusion of modern ideas and allegorical meanings robs the old romances of their chief charm, their natural simplicity and naïve directness; that 'cold intellect has taken the place of creative emotion.'² The beauties, on the other hand, lie in the setting and background which Tennyson constructs for his story, the creation and refashioning of certain characters where the original story allowed him free range to invent most freely,³ besides in the music of the verse and 'the exquisite magnificence of style,'—all minor poetic qualities. If, then, the greatest English poet of the Nineteenth century, whom Van Dyke places next to Shakspeare and Milton, fails in these crucial points of the poetic re-creation of a previous well-known story, what are the chances of success with such a peculiarly difficult and unpliant subject-matter as we have seen the Nibelungen story to be?

What, then, is the conclusion to be drawn from this discussion? Shall we agree with Weitbrecht and Schmidt and the others, and say to the poets: "Keep on with your attempts, keep working away at the *Nibelungensage*, read and profit by the theoretical discussions of the question, and, finally, by your combined efforts you will have prepared the poetical materials in the *Lied* and *Sage* for some poetic genius of the future to mold and shape in lasting, definitive form, and who will create a Nibelungen drama or poem which will be the perfected product and crown of Nibelungen poetry!" No. The only sensible advice to the poet can be: "Let the subject rest, if you care for success, and have any feelings of reverence and

¹ Cf. above, p. 235, note 2.

² Brooke, p. 266 ff.

³ Brooke, p. 331.

respect for the great poetical treasures of the past, which ought to be sacred to every true poet. Do not add another to the many previous, irreverential and unsuccessful attempts. Recognize the fact, that the poetical treasure of the *Nibelungenlied*, like the Nibelungen gold, seems loaded with a curse which falls upon everyone who would take it from its element and wrest it from its original possessor."

It must be acknowledged, that no really great poet has ever attempted the re-creation of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Sage*; but a really great poet would probably never be tempted and, in this way, prove his greatness. It must also be conceded, that the considerations urged by this paper and the conclusions reached may all be wrong. It would be the height of presumption to be less modest than the great Lessing, who says (*Laokoon*, Chap. IV): "How many a conclusion would seem irrefutable in theory if genius had not succeeded in proving the very opposite by an actual fact." And Michael Angelo took the half-hewn block of marble lying for years in the courtyard of the Old Palace at Florence, and carved from it one of the great and famous statues of the world, the *David* of the Academy at Florence. A bungling artist had seemingly ruined the unusually beautiful block; Donatello, San-sovino, and even Leonardo da Vinci had refused to attempt to make use of it, and yet it stands to-day an overwhelming witness to the all-conquering power of genius. And thus a genius, like Shakspeare, might perform the seemingly impossible task and produce the 'reconstructed higher form' of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Sage*. Very true; but to this there is but one consideration to urge. Though the world in the many centuries of its history has produced many artists and many poets of great genius, yet as amongst them all there was but one Michael Angelo, so there was but one Shakspeare. How likely is it that we shall see another?

APPENDIX.

WORKS IN MODERN POETRY BASED UPON THE
LIED AND SAGE.

(Cf. Piper, Kürschner's *Deut. Nat. Lit.*, Bd. 6, Abt. II, Stuttgart, 1889, p. 184 f.; also v. Muth, *Einleitung in das Nibelungenlied*, Paderborn, 1877, p. 416 f.; also *Zs. für den deutschen Unterricht*, 1894, p. 379 f.; *Zur neuesten Nibelungenlitteratur* von Karl Landmann.)

A. Forerunners.

1. Hans Sachs, *Der huernen Sewfried*, 1557.
2. Fr. de la Motte-Fouqué, *Sigurd der Held der Nordens*.
(a). *Sigurd der Schlangentöchter*, Berlin, 1808.
(b). *Sigurds Rache*, Berlin, 1810.

B. Dramas based upon the entire Sage or Lied.

3. Ludwig Uhland, *Die Nibelungen*, 2 Teile. Ein Entwurf von 1817 (Em. Uhland: *L. Uhland, eine Gabe für seine Freunde*, 1863; A. v. Keller, *Uhland als Dramatiker*, 1877).
4. Fr. R. Hermann, *Die Nibelungen in 3 Theilen*.
(a) *Der Nibelungen Hort*, (b) *Siegfried*, (c) *Kriemhilds Rache*, Leipzig, 1819.
5. Chr. Fr. Eichhorn, *Chriemhildens Rache*, Göttingen, 1824.
6. E. Raupach, *Der Nibelungen Hort*, Hamburg, 1834.
7. Chr. Wurm, (a) *Die Nibelungen*, (b) *Siegfrieds Tod*, 1839.
8. Reinold Reimar (Adolf Glaser), *Kriemhildens Rache*, Hamburg, 1853.
9. Fr. Hebbel, *Die Nibelungen*, 3 Teile, Hamburg, 1862.
(a) *Der gehörnte Siegfried*, (b) *Siegfrieds Tod* (cf. *Kriemhilds Rache*).
10. L. Ettmüller, *Sigfrid*, 1870.
11. Adolf Wilbrandt, *Kriemhild*, Wien, 1877.
12. Wilhelm Fischer, *Siegfried: Trauerspiel*, Reudnitz-Leipzig (no date).
13. Georg Siegert, (a) *Siegfrieds Tod*, 1887, (b) *Kriemhilds Rache*, 1888.

C. Brunhild Dramas.

14. Ferd. Wachter, *Brunhild*, Jena, 1821.
15. J. A. Chr. Zarnack, *Siegfrieds Tod*, Potsdam, 1826.
16. E. Geibel, *Brunhild*, Stuttgart, 1857.
17. Robt. Waldmüller (Ed. Duboc), *Brunhild* (Dresden, 1863), Leipzig, 1874.
18. Reinh. Sigismund, *Brynhilde*, Rudolstadt, 1878.
19. Irmin v. Veihel-Müller, *Die Nibelungen*, Ein Dramen Cyclus. Erster Teil: *Brünhilt*, Pfungstadt, 1880.

D. Kriemhild Dramas.

20. Joh Wilh. Müller, *Chriemhilds Rache*, Trauerspiel mit dem Chor.
(a) *Der Schwur*, (b) *Rüdiger*, (c) *Chriemhild's Ende*, Heidelberg, 1822.
21. Aug. Kopisch, *Chrimhild*, 1830. Gesammelte werke, Bd. 4, Berlin, 1856.
22. Wm. Hosaeus, *Kriemhild*, Paderborn, 1866.
23. A. L. H. v. Liebhaber, *Kriemhild* (only in ms., see Goedeke, i³, p. 908).
24. Fried. Arnd, *Kriemhild*, Leipzig, 1875.
25. Reinh. Sigismund, *Chriemhilde*, Rudolstadt, 1875.

E. Rüdiger Dramas.

26. Wilh. Osterwald, *Rüdiger von Bechlarén*, 1849.
27. A. L. Schenk, *Markgraf Rüdiger*, 1860.
28. Fel. Dahn, *Markgraf Rüdiger von Bechlarén*, 1875.

F. Attila Dramas (cf. Piper).*

29. Jos. Nep. v. Kalchberg, *Attila*, 1806.
30. F. L. Zach. Werner, *Attila, König der Hunnen*, Berlin, 1812.
31. Herm. Rustige, *Attila*, 1853.

G. Operas.

32. Fr. Theod. Vischer, *Vorschlag zu einer Oper.*, 5 Akte, 1844.
33. E. Gerber, *Die Nibelungen*, Musik von H. L. E. Dorn, 1854.
34. Richard Wagner, *Der Ring der Nibelungen*, 1876, entire.
(a) *Das Rheingold*, (b) *Die Walküre*, (c) *Siegfried*, (d) *Die Götterdämmerung*.
35. Georg Fuchs, *Das Nibelungenlied, Festspiel* (Musik von Karl Pottgiesser, Aufgeführt zu Dortmund, 1893).

H. Epic poems.

36. G. Pfarrrius, *Chriemhildens Rache* (Date?), *Ein erzählendes Gedicht*.
37. Wilh. Jordan, *Die Nibelunge*, Frankfurt a/M.
(a) *Sigfridsage*, 1869; (b) *Hilderbrant's Heimkehr*, 1875.
38. W. Wegener, *Siegfried und Chriemhilde, Eine poetische Gestaltung der Nibelungensage*, Brandenburg, 1867.
39. Werner Hahn, *Kriemhild* (Date?), *Ein Volksgesang der Deutschen*.

I. Works in Foreign Languages.

40. Henrik Ibsen, *Härmändene paa Helgeland*, Christiania, 1858.
41. Karl Gjellerup, *Brymild* (Drama in Danish), 1890.
42. Wm. Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*, London, 1876.

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*It was impossible to verify these, except the work of Werner, which is based upon the historical account of Attila's last year of life and not upon the *Nibelungensage*.